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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION ON MIDDLE EAST

Summary

-- Lead story in all papers today, February 28, focuses on King Abdullah's meeting with the Syrian Prime Minister in Amman yesterday and his remarks stressing Jordan's keenness on Lebanon's unity and sovereignty. Another lead story reports on an expected "conclusive confrontation" between the Lebanese government and the Lebanese opposition as the Lebanese parliament is expected to debate a vote of confidence in the government.

Editorial Commentary

-- "The region is changing"

Chief Editor Taher Udwan writes on the back-page of independent, mass-appeal Arabic daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm (02/28): "Attempts to stop change and to stand against people's demands and against democracy under the pretext that Bush is calling for those things are tired, old arguments. Democracy has become a just cause in the Arab world and people living under democratic regimes (would be) able to preserve their sovereignty and to regain it if lost to American occupation and hegemony. America's influence on regimes towards change is due to the fact that these regimes are completely dependent on America, economically and politically.. (It is) the absence of democracy that leads to change via occupation, just like what happened in Iraq. If the people are free under a democratic and political regime, then this would be a method of fortification against occupation and of salvation from weakness, helplessness and collapse."

-- "The scent of conspiracy this time"

Daily columnist Jamil Nimri writes on the back-page of independent, mass-appeal Arabic daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm (02/28): "True, the conspiracy theory is very common among the Arabs, but this time the matter is very confusing. The [recent Tel Aviv suicide] operation is completely untimely, except from the viewpoint of sabotaging the success achieve by the [Palestinian] Authority and all the factions. Hamas, Jihad and Al-Aqsa Brigades were party to the truce, which was achieved through political conviction. They have no reason whatsoever to undertake the operation.. The party with the most interest to be served is the extremist right-wing Israeli party, if not the Israeli authority itself, since the settlers want to stop the withdrawal at any cost, as do parties that walked out of the coalition in protest against the withdrawal.. The success of Abbas and the [Palestinian] factions in endorsing and abiding by the truce has embarrassed Israel and protected the unity of the Palestinian internal arena. The continuation of the truce will enable the issue of the criminal separation wall that was built under the pretext of putting a stop to the operation to come forward, but now we see Israel saying that it cannot be reassured about the discontinuation of these operations despite the truce. It is not the conspiracy theory, but the reality of the situation that shows which party was in most need of this suspicious operation."

-- "The malicious use of the Tel-Aviv operation"

Daily columnist Rakan Majali writes on the back-page of center-left, influential Arabic daily Al-Dustour (02/28): "We do not understand the suspicions that were launched and the Palestinian Authority's jumping on the bandwagon of the media campaign that is designed to brainwash the Palestinian and Arab people and to convince them that the young man who blew himself up in the heart of Tel Aviv had betrayed the Palestinian cause and dealt a blow to the process of liberation. The most serious thing about what has been happening over the past few days is not the call

to bury the Intifada or to disarm the opposition, but to turn martyrdom into a heinous crime.. What seems to be required these days is that the Tel Aviv incident be used to hold its perpetrator responsible for the loss of the illusionary chance to settle the Palestinian cause!

-- "Syria and the tough choices"

Columnist Muna Shugair writes on the back-page of semi-official, influential Arabic daily Al-Rai (02/28): "The Syrian presence in Lebanon is as much a vital Syrian issue as it is a Lebanese one. This presence has always aimed to protect Syria from Israel's threat and to provide a very important space for the protection of Syria's national security, to protect Lebanon in the face of a large enemy and to protect the Lebanese from themselves and their political and sectarian struggles.. Syria now faces very tough choices that have to do not only with Resolution 1559 and its continued military and security presence in Lebanon, but also with challenges to its own national security, since its withdrawal from Lebanon will place it face-to-face with Israel. So will Syria continue to resist international calls for its withdrawal from Lebanon or will it stay in Lebanon and suffer the consequences? Syria's withdrawal in response to the will of the international community will help preserve the Lebanese equilibrium and in turn will preserve Syria's interests . and will protect the Lebanese political parties from falling into the American trap disguised as the hope to achieve Lebanon's independence and liberation from Syria's custody.. The option to withdraw from Lebanon might be a costly one for Syria from the political, security and economic viewpoint, but any delay will be even more costly due to the exhaustion of the political powers allied with Syria and the growing Lebanese hostility against Syria. Syria must opt for the tougher choice, because it would be easier and less costly than the other choices."

-- "The Tel Aviv operation: a mad man threw a stone!"

Daily columnist Sultan Hattab writes on the op-ed page of semi-official, influential Arabic daily Al-Rai (02/28): "The saying 'a mad man threw a stone in the well and a hundred sane men would not take it out' really does apply to the Tel Aviv operation that was perpetrated by a suspicious hand. I say suspicious, because the volume of harm and destruction inflicted upon the Palestinian people and their national cause was huge by all measures. This operation came as an attempt to destroy all the large-scale and sincere efforts exerted by the Palestinian leadership under Mahmoud Abbas; efforts focused on reproducing a pragmatic Palestinian stand that handles events related to the Palestinian cause responsibly and maturely. This operation reveals the corrupted state of the Palestinian struggle and the amount of disorganization and weakness that have come to dominate Palestinian military and organizational work, where irresponsible individuals take action in retaliation to events that they (as individuals) are interested in.. The Tel Aviv operation, given its timing amidst a truce and Palestinian progress towards the achievement of Palestinian demands and rights, shows that those who carried it out are simply targeting the interests of the Palestinian people. This operation and its perpetrators are against the Palestinian higher national interests and must be exposed as such and held accountable."

HALE